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The Case of Poland: Encouraging Human Geography through Lesbian Studies

Abstract

What follows is a direct transcription of the conference paper that I gave during the very prestigious Annual International Conference 2018 of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers). It took place at the Cardiff University, Wales, UK, on 28-31 of August, 2018. I gave this presentation within the very same panel session that I organised together with Kath Browne from the Maynooth University in Dublin, Ireland, and Catherine J. Nash from the Brock University in Canada. Our session, which I was also honoured to chair, was titled *Engaging Contemporary Sexual-Gendered Realities: Geographies of Feminisms, Sexualities, and Beyond*¹. Five presentations were part of the panel, including mine. The 20-minute paper was fortified with a Power-Point presentation, which, of course, is irrelevant to the purposes of the transcription herein. Even though I have decided to keep the title of this transcription in compliance with the title of that presentation, its potential and meaning is much greater. Thinking of a proper academic article that I could develop based on that paper, I would probably make it a point to emphasise the significance of the intersections between sociology and geography, and how they affect my local ambitions to introduce (into the Polish academia) geographies of sexualities on the one hand and interdisciplinary lesbian studies on the other. The paper presented below reflects on the implications of this experience and stance of mine.

Keywords

geographies of sexualities, human geography, lesbian studies, sociology of culture, Poland

Abstrakt

Poniższy tekst jest bezpośrednim zapisem referatu konferencyjnego, który wygłosiłam podczas prestiżowej cyklicznej międzynarodowej konferencji Królewskiego Towarzystwa Geograficznego (z Instytutem Brytyjskich Geografów). Konferencja odbyła się na Uniwersytecie w Cardiff (Walia) w dniach 28-31 sierpnia 2018. Prezentacja moja była częścią sesji, którą zorganizowałam wraz z Kath Browne (Maynooth University w Dublinie) oraz Catherine J. Nash (Brock University w Kanadzie). Panel nasz, któremu miałam też zaszczyt przewodniczyć, zatytułowany był *Engaging Contemporary Sexual-Gendered Realities: Geographies of Feminisms, Sexualities, and Beyond*. W jego programie znalazło się pięć prezentacji, w tym moja. Mój dwudziestominutowy referat był wzbogacony i uzupełniony prezentacją w PowerPoint, co jednak jest nieistotne dla celów niniejszego zapisu. Pomimo, że zdecydowałam się zachować tutaj tytuł zgodnie z jego faktycznym stanem podczas

¹ Its official abstract can still be read at: <http://conference.rgs.org/AC2018/106>

konferencji, to jego potencjał i znaczenie są znacznie szersze. Myśląc o pełnym i właściwie ustrukturyzowanym artykule naukowym, jaki mogłabym stworzyć w oparciu o ten referat konferencyjny, prawdopodobnie chciałabym przede wszystkim uwydatnić znaczenie przecięć pomiędzy socjologią, a geografią, a także jak wpływają one na moje lokalne ambicje wprowadzenia (na polską uczelnię wyższą) z jednej strony geografii seksualności, a z drugiej interdyscyplinarnych studiów nad podmiotowością lesbijską. Zaprezentowany poniżej referat jest refleksją na temat implikacji takiego mojego doświadczenia i stanowiska.

Słowa kluczowe

geografie seksualności, geografia człowieka, studia nad podmiotowością lesbijską, socjologia kultury, Polska

The general context for this reflexive paper is that I defended my doctoral dissertation in June 2018; it is important inasmuch as with the dissertation—one to be turned into a proper book both in English and in Polish—I am trying to introduce and establish a lesbian-studies discourse in the Polish academia. My work has so far been a conceptual re-investigation of how the lesbian can be conceived of with the emphasis on the significance of difference and locality while considering stories of gender and sexuality, and it is amazing how many **geographical transgressions** reside in this one simple statement. Today I want to draw your attention to how what I do relates to the question of human geography in general and geographies of sexualities in particular. So as much as it is going to be about my work, it is also a story of **a geographical status of the academia itself**. *First*, then, technically I am a sociologist and not a geographer, but at one point, exactly five years ago, I met wonderful feminist and sexual geographers, and this significantly reshaped my objectives. So although I am not a trained geographer and am relatively new to the field, it is the support and cooperation I am involved in **within geography, not sociology**, that has had the biggest impact on what I do and represent. This further reveals paradoxes, for neither human geography nor its gendered and sexual subfields exist in Poland institutionally. *Second*, sociology of sexuality is a niche and a very quiet subdiscipline in Poland, pretty much invisible in sociology itself, which makes my academic capital invisible, too. *Third*, what I do is highly interdisciplinary, and interdisciplinarity is not a thing in Poland at all, possibly with the exception of timid and sceptical connections being made between sociology and philosophy. All this into account, the general dilemma seems to be about what my actual academic status is. In effect, not only am I transgressing the academia in Poland by **just looking for the lesbian** in a country that has had no such discourses socially or academically, but I am also adding some additional layers of novelty to the academia itself. So, for instance, right from the beginning I assumed a **sexual-geography position** by asking a question about who a lesbian **citizen** is and how—or **where**—they can be found. *Fourth*, the way I am

engaging with the discourse is through queer perspective as a general framework both sociologically and geographically, but first **I had to queer the queer theory** by rejecting its general assumptions as well as the local implications and associations that have been made in Poland. Therefore, I reinterpreted queer, applying it as a **sociological method** and a **background tool** rather than a theory. This has been a controversial transgression regardless of a discipline and irrespective of a locality—**I am actually changing the landscape of queer and am reconciling the queer with the lesbian**. As this manifests through **language** primarily, I began with rejecting and dismissing the term ‘lesbianism’, both in English and in Polish, and am encouraging, again in both languages, the term ‘**lesbianity**’ instead. The reason for this is the pejorative character of the roots of the ‘-ism’ ending that was conceived of through early psychiatry and sexology, as Foucault pointed out. In contrast, the ‘-ity’ ending is linguistically and socially neutral in both languages. In general, then, lesbianity as I see it is about **an autonomous and auto-reflexive way of managing one’s own intimacy and emotionality with regard to genders and sexualities**, and it is by no means restricted to biological features. This way what one will end up with is subjectivity, not identity. When capturing all this into words, I usually need to resort to many meta-linguistic explanations that show how tricky and impossible it is to convey the allegedly simple question of female non-heterosexualities. More to the point, my purpose is to conceptually transform the ‘Western’ status of womanhood and actual women, moving from their traditional positions of an object and an object towards their state of an actual **subject**. I therefore speak of lesbian **subjectivity**, not identity, demonstrating that—regardless of a locality—the notion of identity has been imposed and over-intellectualised by researchers themselves, most commonly within sociology, psychology, and philosophy. In my dissertation, I pointed out that identity is an artificial **category of comparison** that is put on groups and individuals from the outside. As such, I claimed, it is extremely limiting and should not be used as an analytical tool for dealing with lived experiences of groups and individuals. Subjectivity, by contrast, comes **from within** and requires agency and reflexivity. These socio-philosophical considerations of mine culminate with the question of **lesbian citizenships** that I am trying to encourage in the Polish reality, and this is the area that I will be focusing on more extensively and properly, i.e. empirically, in the not-too-distant future.

All this constitutes a complex multi-faceted enterprise in itself and even more so when one considers the social, political, and academic background. Just to give you a hint of this background, Poland enjoys a bit of an ambiguous geographical and political status. On the one hand, it is, of course, part of Central and Eastern Europe, but at the same time it **did** make its way to the European Union that is supposed to be the symbol of the ‘Western’ world. However, as a member of the EU we are not doing so great; we are under

investigations or owe huge fines for breaching human rights and dismissing concepts such as hate speech or hate crimes. As a whole, the country's specificity lies in its history, which is best embodied by the Soviet era that cut us off the minority movements and human rights campaigns that were going on in 'Western' countries and brought progress in legislative systems **and**, consequently, mentality. Due to this fact, we simply lag behind when it comes to general worldview and patterns of behaviour, and this is not only on the political/diplomatic level, but it is also, if sadly, noticeable on the micro level in everyday social situations and interactions with individuals. You can just **feel** the hostility. The political situation does not help much; since 2016 Poland has been ruled by the radical right-wing party and these people have incited violence and promoted questionable values as evident through neo-nazi pro-national and Catholic tendencies that are of a daily occurrence and are willingly supported by the public media. And when I say Catholic, mind you, I mean a special Polish version of Catholicism that is extremely narrow and aggressive, differs from what is considered Catholic in other countries, and makes sense only when you take into account the Church's role back in the Soviet era. So where do you think a place of feminisms or minority organisations is in the historical and political landscape like this one? Academically, there are several gender-studies programmes available at universities in bigger cities, but they are not BA- or MA-level; usually they are one-year-and-a-half courses with several subjects taking place once or twice a month, and these studies give some theoretical knowledge about 'Western' feminisms and methods, but they do not give real qualifications or a degree. They also do not tend to look into the implications of intersectionality, sexuality, disability, poverty, etc. Socially, in turn, it is a sensitive subject, too. Contrary to popular beliefs expressed mainly by activists, **Poland has not seen a solid feminist movement**, let alone what has elsewhere been termed a wave. This, too, has been caused by the isolation that the country was forced to suffer in the communist era. There are just about **four to five** recognisable feminists in Poland today, who continue to be labelled as radical even though all that these women have been concerned about **for decades now** is the question of women in politics and the public sphere, which, by the so-called 'Western' standards—although these are not a valid framework for comparison—would situate them within the late first wave or equal-rights feminism. So you can see the gap here and the relativity of words such as 'radical'. Some of the recent political events in Poland have brought a certain change in that they sparked nationwide outbursts in defence of women's reproductive rights, i.e. several proposals on a total abortion ban have been countered by what has been termed the Black Protests. This was, perhaps, the very first instance of a collective action with regard to women's rights. However, analytically speaking it was more of a **situational counter-action** and would perhaps constitute a fine example of a corporeal

feminism, **except...** feminism was never a keyword here. The abortion ban is everything that the reactive public have been interested in; it all has little to do with views on womanhood or gender relations and inequalities, and it certainly never concerned female non-heterosexuality, which shows that one **can** talk about the body and reproductive rights and still not touch upon the question of gender, sexuality, or feminism.

Under all these circumstances it is hardly surprising that **the lesbian component** has been as absent as ever, both socially and academically. And this is where I came in with my discourses, general activity, and objectives. As **my very being** in the academia in Poland is problematic, what is important is that technically all the conceptuality I am doing means engaging with **knowledge production** with regard to gendered and sexual lived experiences, which is why I was able to frame my work before the doctoral committee in terms of sociology **of knowledge** more than the not so solid sociology of sexuality. Due to be published both in the UK and in Poland, in both languages, the work has several multi-layered objectives; you got a glimpse of it and you can imagine how exotic each of these layers is. More to the point, some of my purposes and tasks connected with them are relevant to the Polish geo-spatial and social contexts specifically, while others are more broad and rely on my conviction that the feminist and lesbian scholarship in more 'Western' spaces could take new directions, too. Following rhetorics demonstrated by bell hooks, as a scholar I am situated on the Margin of genders-and-sexualities discourses. This position, however, enables one to see more clearly what is going on in the so-called Centre, allowing one to choose the contents more skilfully and possibly avoid mistakes that had been made elsewhere, all this by **actually adjusting** to a locality rather than yielding to the Anglo-American hegemony by emulating 'Western' linearity that is too often considered the default. In short, the boundaries are not supposed to be clear-cut and part of my role as a sociologist of knowledge **and** a geographer of sexuality is to overthrow the 'East'- 'West' divide. In fact, in the dissertation I also presented a linguistic impossibility connected with case studies from Afghanistan and India, just to prove how inappropriate comparisons and transfers of default discourses are. One could mark such moments or situations as 'local' or 'more broad' in the attempt to escape a definitive label, but the reality shows that it is not that simple. For instance, Kath Browne and myself have been involved in several projects, whose purpose is to **reclaim** the idea of lesbian feminisms in different forms across places and spaces, and it reveals interesting implications, because on a local level I cannot speak of **re-claiming** a lesbian feminism, **for there has never been one in Poland**. So what I do instead is try to conceive the ways in which a well-adjusted local version of lesbian feminism could emerge based on a combination of discursive and political strategies, but a modification with regard to historical and social circumstances is most crucial. So, for example, the very idea of intersectionality should precede

lesbian-feminist efforts in Poland, but intersectionality will not work in its basic form in a mono-cultural and culturally xenophobic society. So you can see how complex these things really are. On a side note, re-connecting the concepts of gender and sexuality is an overarching purpose of mine; both academic feminism and some single social initiatives that exist in Poland are all extremely **non**-sexual, but I have also discovered that this tendency, although to a much lesser extent, is present within many gender and women's studies programmes around the world, seventeen of which I did analyse in the dissertation. In short, gender and sexuality cannot and must not be explored separately, since historically and culturally **they had been invented and designed in order to justify each other**, which is why it is impossible for them to exist on their own. Regrettably, many programmes across the world—as well as sociologists and geographers—do tend to dismiss this. This, however, is a subject to explore separately on another occasion.

On a side note I should mention that due to the fact that the institutional construction of geography in Poland is rather limited, I needed to add this 'cultural' adjective to the title of my dissertation² as well as devote a whole chapter to the explanation of all the **intra**-disciplinary divisions regarding subdisciplines in geography that are elementary and obvious to many of you, i.e. trained geographers from so many places around the world. For me, however, this subtle linguistic means was the only way that the committee would let me have my dissertation framed in geographical terms, for otherwise it would not make sense to them. Sociology aside, in Poland there is also no separate social or cultural geographies; we generally speak of social and economic geography and it is something very different³, and '**human**' is not recognised and nowhere to be found⁴. In this light it is hardly surprising that feminist geographies or geographies of sexualities are a discursive impossibility in such a landscape.

What I have shared so far could be summed up under the phrase '**academic geo-temporal ethics**', which is how I like to think of what I do, but my apologies to you as trained geographers if this is an oversimplification or a misuse of terms. And now a last note on methodology—the conceptual way of doing sociology in Poland is not a preferred one, so I purposefully finished my dissertation with, first, an outline of a distinct lesbian-studies university course that I would like to implement from a socio-geographical perspective, and, second, methodological recommendations and even declarations regarding how as a post-doc I am going to continue my project **empirically**. What I suggested in this contexts admittedly involves rather standard methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews, personal logs, photo-elicitation interviews), but I also designed the

² This being *Lesbian Studies at the Intersection of Sociology and Cultural Geography*.

³ Although, problematically enough, 'socio-cultural' has sometimes been used as a synonym here.

⁴ And it should not be confused with the geography of population, which is a rather dry and statistically-driven area.

contents and questions (more than forty of them) that these methods should pertain to, and that was, perhaps, the most unique part from the Polish academic perspective. Obviously, some of these questions and issues are classic from the point of view of the ‘Western’ feminist geography, so for instance some of the research would be about comparing urban and rural lesbian landscapes and realities; taking into account how the city is constructed as the male aggressive zone in relation to the stereotypically female and nature-oriented countryside; exploring how the ‘normal’ citizen is constructed; seeing how lesbian women navigate their identities and subjectivities through heterosexist public spaces; seeing how lesbian subjects interpret and navigate through home versus public spaces; or recognising what the means can be of altering and validating spaces as lesbian sites, for example through language, music, or dress code. Other than this, participatory action research (PAR) could be pursued at later stages, though it is a rather exotic way of doing research in Poland, because we still have not dealt with the whole ‘objective science’ claim. The final thing to mention here is that in the reviewing process I was asked about a possibility of doing cartography and visual mapping with regard to lesbian subjectivities in Poland. I responded positively and I strongly believe that this is a tool worth considering for the purposes of mine. However, the truth is that this is a task for a more distant future given the historical and academic context I have just presented to you, and for now I would have absolutely no idea how to get down to this. Perhaps this is a new task for myself as a sexual geographer to conceive of such a possibility in the attempt at promoting new innovative ways of thinking of who a Polish lesbian citizen is. Either way, the ambiguous academic status of myself as a scholar on the one hand and of my scholarly capital (to derive from Bourdieu) on the other makes it challenging to imagine what is going to happen next. However, it is precisely the process of our imagining that will eventually equip all the ever-changing spaces and places with diversity, equity, and inclusivity.

Concluding Notes⁵

What I have spoken about during that conference is merely a fraction of my experience and the enterprise with regard to the project of new interdisciplinary lesbian studies. The concept of lesbian subjectivity is supposed to be a **metaphor** for the possibility of ‘**subjectifying**’ **the woman**, allowing for the transformation and enhancement of her Western-cultural situation as timelessly described by, among others, Monique

⁵ These were not part of the conference paper and have now been added for the purposes of the academic-journal form herein.

Wittig⁶ or Adrienne Rich⁷. As I have discovered, the field of human geography offers endless possibilities of pursuing many facets of lesbian citizenry in a given locality. Its cooperation with various strands of sociology can, in turn, open doors for investigations with regard to the role of language in dealing with questions of female sexuality and intimacy. Importantly, and as I have been trying to demonstrate throughout the conference paper, it is the positionality and the academic capital and personal assets of the researcher that matter and add to the quality and status of the project itself, not to mention the prospective informants. Problematic as my enterprise and presence has been in the Polish social and institutional spaces, I believe that it elicits relevant questions with regard to the existing idea(s) and perception of ‘**scholarly sexual citizenship**’.

Citation:

Olasik Marta (2019). *The Case of Poland: Encouraging Human Geography through Lesbian Studies*. “Fabrica Societatis”, No. 2, pp. 108-115 [access: day, month, year]. Available in Internet: www.fabricsocietatis.uni.wroc.pl, DOI: [10.34616/fs.19.2.108.115](https://doi.org/10.34616/fs.19.2.108.115).

⁶ See: Wittig, Monique 1992 [1969]. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁷ See: Rich, Adrienne. 1993 [1980]. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” in: H. Abelove, M. A. Barale, and D. M. Halperin (eds.) *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, New York/London: Routledge, pp. 227-254.